

LEVEL 1 - 27 OF 72 STORIES

The Associated Press

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Neighbors on Cuba's Isle of Youth call Edith Sundstrom "la norte-americana." The 77-year-old woman is the only American living there.

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It is where Mrs. Sundstrom grew up, where she fell in love and married. Relatives have begged her to return to the United States, but she refuses.

"We had a very good life, a very good one," she said in an interview with The Miami News. "Of course, then there was a colony of about 1,500 Americans and the social life was very pleasant.

"And we had a lot of Cuban friends, too. After all these years, I still don't speak Spanish very well."

Mrs. Sundstrom was 16 when she came to the isolated island, on the south coast of Cuba, from Fitchburg, Mass., with her parents in the 1920s. At the time, it was known as the Isle of Pines. A number of Americans had traveled to the island under the mistaken assumption that under the Platt Amendment it would be U.S. soil, like Puerto Rico.

The 1901 amendment to Cuba's constitution limited Cuban independence by allowing the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs. It also allowed for American purchase or lease of land for naval bases in Cuba. The U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo was built under a 1903 treaty with Cuba.

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Mrs. Sundstrom recalled, "We thought it would be a good change, especially for my mother, who was not well. My father thought he would get rich and sit on the front porch smoking fat cigars."

Mrs. Sundstrom's parents ended up managing a 1,500-acre grapefruit farm for a wealthy Swedish-American family. In 1929, she married Albert Sundstrom, a Swedish-American who went to Cuba to seek his fortune.

The young couple prospered. But the political temperament of Cuba changed when Fidel Castro and a band of rebels overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista and established the Cuban Communist Party.

The Castro government took the Sundstroms' hardware business shortly after the takeover, Mrs. Sundstrom said.

The Sundstroms were undaunted by the government's actions and Albert Sundstrom later became a Cuban citizen, she said.

"We were treated very well ... So he decided we might as well stay," she said.

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Three years ago, she said, her husband and her mother died.

Alexis Rosa, a 25-year-old Cuban who teaches English, helps take care of the woman. He recently moved into her house and she said she would turn the property over to Rosa when she dies.

Mrs. Sundstrom says she enjoys economic benefits in Cuba she would not get in the United States.

"Hospitals and medicines are mostly free here," she said. "I am not from rich people. My people are of modest circumstances ... I don't want to be a burden on them."

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